

Maid Joan

By Ethel Barrington

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As the last strains of Schumann's symphony died away Joan leaned back, with a sigh. Her enjoyment of music was so acute at times it touched the borderland of pain. Her eyes wandered to the other occupant of the box, who had entered late, and she was surprised to find his gaze fixed on her in recognition. She felt a flush glow beneath her olive skin; then she bowed gracefully and with a sort of finality, returning to the study of her programme. It was one of the small boxes tucked far back in the wide balcony of the academy, but, as Joan assured her mother, music was quite as enjoyable there as in the more conspicuous seats.

When the solo ended she could not resist glancing toward her companion or smiling in recognition of their mutual enjoyment. Besides, had he not saved her at his own risk from a scorching motor car only the week before? At the time she had been so startled that she barely thanked him; her one desire being to avoid the disagreeable attention caused by her escape. It would be only ordinary good manners to thank him now.

"You were very prompt and courageous the other day," she began graciously. "My thanks were slight, but don't judge my gratitude by that."

"I trust you suffered no ill effects from the adventure?"

"No—that is, nothing material." Joan laughed at her own wit, having considered to her sister that her rescuer's eyes and rich deep voice had haunted her ever since. Her laugh loosened the strain of reserve, so that they exchanged criticisms on the orchestra. The girl was delighted to find some one as music mad as herself. She rose regretfully when it was over; but he detained her, asking diffidently: "Will you permit me to introduce myself?"

Accepting the proffered card, Joan recognized a name given by her sister as that of a fellow guest at their aunt's recent reception. Her hero, then, proved all a maid could desire, though his very prominence left little chance of further acquaintance.

"If I knew your name," he suggested hopefully, "perhaps a mutual friend—I do want to know you better."

Joan hesitated, but because he was so evidently in earnest she was tempted to admit: "I'm called Joan, and there is at least one person who knows us both. If sincere you will find out the rest for yourself." Then she hurried home.

A tale of tribulation greeted her. "Bridger has gone, without a moment's notice," her sister complained. "Mother and I have worked all the afternoon. Joan, I'm distracted—unless you'll help me."

"I'm not much good at cooking," protested Joan, "and for a dinner party—Alice, you'll be a fright if you cry or rub your nose any redder. What do you want me to do?"

"Mother will finish the cooking," declared Alice. "Will you serve it? Oh, please," as Joan negatived the suggestion. "I should be so humiliated if compelled to wait on ourselves! There will be no one that you know—only two men."

"Mr. Clive?" inquired Joan. And on her sister nodding assent she yielded, with a grimace.

Before going to her mother's assistance, however, she could not resist relating the afternoon's meeting, winding up triumphantly, "So that my hero proves to be the exclusive Laurence Hale."

While dressing Alice thought unavailingly of this revelation. Having told Joan that the proposed guests were strangers, if she now confessed Hale to be one of them would her sister not refuse the part assigned her? Yet much depended on the success of the evening.

The girls' aunt, Mrs. Drew, moved in the circle of Philadelphia's elite, a privilege forfeited by their mother on her marriage to a struggling musician. Of late Mrs. Drew, perhaps because of Alice's resemblance to herself, had taken an interest in her niece and had given her a winter's gayety, an advance Alice now planned to follow up with an informal dinner in order that her mother might meet Clive, who had shown her considerable attention. Before Bridger's defection everything had promised well; even now there need be no failure if Joan fulfilled her promise.

"What do?" demanded Joan, rushing in arrayed in regulation black with a white apron, her naturally wavy hair drawn severely back and planned closely around her head.

Alice felt reassured. Joan looked so demurely prim.

She received the guests, so Joan did not see them until she announced softly: "Dinner is served," when meeting the astonished gaze of Laurence Hale he fled precipitately back to the dining room. Enraged that such a trick should have been played her, her first thought was of throwing up the task and leaving the little party to shift for itself. No harm, however, was done. Alice's plea for forgiveness, which was wilfully misunderstood by offering her the olive. She watched Clive with curiosity, discovering that though was deferential to her mother and his part in the conversation he seemed to think only of her sister, and a rush of tender sympathy Joan gave the embarrassment of her own action. Hale was puzzled and chagrined, bowed politely, but she systematically

ally avoided meeting his eye. When the ladies returned to the parlor with Clive in their wake Hale hung back, Joan, busy with the silver, waited curiously, but apparently changing his intention Hale followed his friend.

"You were perfect, dear," her mother admitted the next day, "but I only consented to the plan because Alice fretted so."

"What can it matter?" exclaimed Joan comfortingly. "I have no society aspirations, as has Alice."

Before the week passed Alice's engagement to Harry Clive was announced. She was very gracious in her new found happiness.

"I am going to tell Harry of your good nature, Joan, and have him set you right with that Mr. Hale. I believe you like each other." But Joan cut short this project.

"If he thinks me a servant girl after talking to me, let him."

"But the evidence is against you," Alice reminded her. Be reasonable. King Copthorne and the beggar maid belong to the age of romance, not to the twentieth century."

"You will make no explanation," persisted Joan, unmoved. "As for your delightful Harry, you will find he did not even look at me."

This statement proved correct. Clive's unembarrassed greeting of his future sister-in-law proved him unhampered by a suspicion that he had ever eaten a dinner of her serving. Friday's concert found Joan sorely disgruntled. She was sure that the unity of the first violins was ragged, that the soprano sang carelessly, and was meditating a hasty retreat when some one spoke softly in her ear:

"Good afternoon, Maid Joan!" Laurence Hale appropriated the vacant chair at her side. "I've been looking for you all this afternoon."

"You have discovered my name?" she asked mischievously.

"No, but I've discovered something of greater importance—that your name does not matter at all."

The exquisite strains of a Tchaikowsky composition silenced them, and Joan found the concert suddenly full of strange delight. The spell was still over her when they came out into the street. Hale, having gained permission to see her to a car, was silent.

"Of course I recognized you the other night," he said at last, "and was too astonished to reason clearly at first. But one of two things is certain, you are either playing some prank or are in trouble. If the latter, I want to help you. One moment," as Joan was about to speak. "You must understand my position. Possibly you are one of those who laugh at love at first sight. I believe in it, having experienced it. Later I hope to make you sympathetic. At present I can think only of your position."

"You mean," Joan's voice sounded unusually small, "you like me despite my being only a maid?"

"The most bewildering maid in the world!"

"Don't look at me like that. It is embarrassing in the street. Besides this is my car." Then relenting as she waited an opportunity to enter: "It was a masquerade to help my sister. Suppose you ever come again, inquire for Joan Prince."

"I'll try that suggestion now," said Hale gratefully as he followed her into the car.

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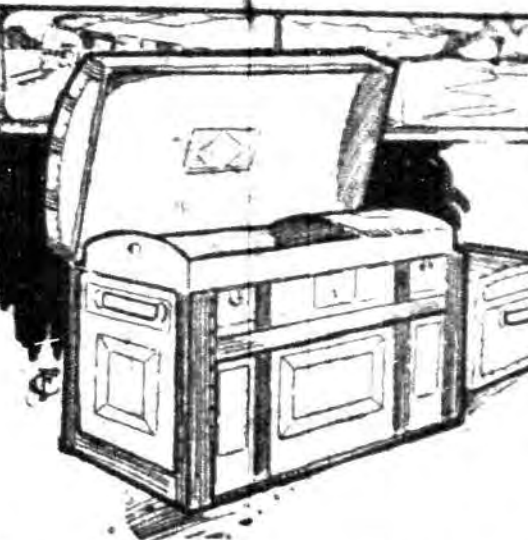
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